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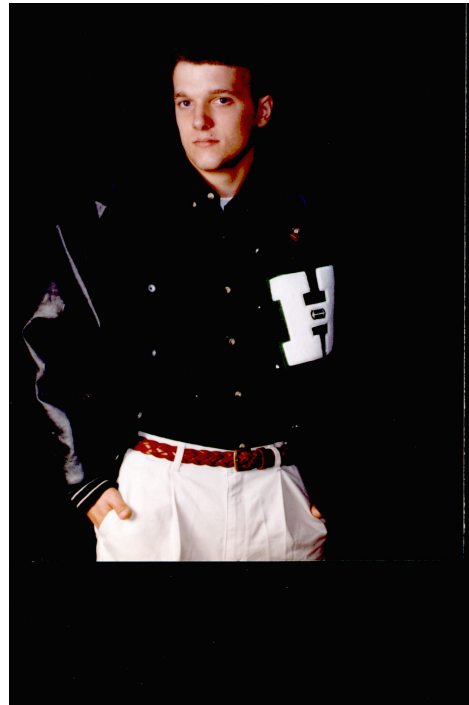
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Existentialism in the Writing Center: The Path to Individuality

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by Joseph Hill

Exercising your freedom of choice can make you a better writer and writing consultant.



Joseph Hill

Being a philosophy minor and English major, I constantly look at interactions that take place between the different disciplines and ways in which life can be approached from a philosophical standpoint. Existentialism is a philosophy that piqued my interest with its reliance on the precedence of the individual and the consequentiality of man's choices. And like Jean- Paul Sartre once stated, I believe that "Existentialism must be lived to be really sincere" (47).

Working at the [Writing Center](#) at [Sam Houston State University](#), I have discovered a way to incorporate existential philosophy into my interactions with students. Aspects of the versions espoused by Sartre and Kierkegaard are particularly applicable in my involvement with the various people that I tutored. Their philosophies have allowed me to approach tutoring with a new outlook and profound enjoyment.

Soren Kierkegaard, forerunner of Sartre in the existential tradition, states that the existentialist individual has two duties. One is to contemplate his or her existence as an individual; another is to contemplate his or her existence as an individual in the eyes of society. The individual does not exist in a vacuum. It is

only through both his or her facing the void/nothingness and making a claim by one's interactions with it and others that existence is possible. Kierkegaard identifies this, then, as a fundamental duality in the existentialist individual. There is the charming societal individual and the alienated individual who contemplates his or her existence with fear and trembling.

At the Writing Center, we all occasionally receive a horrible paper, a paper that makes us want to relinquish our tasks as tutors. But we don't. We don't because our interactions with these clients, even on the small level it is, defines both us and them at the same time. When student writers are alone, in front of that computer screen, they are undergoing Kierkegaardian fear and trembling stemming from their insecurities about their existence as both writers and individuals. But, when the students bring the papers to us, the tutors, it is our function to engage them, and force them to realize that they can exist as an independent and individual writer. Alone, they ponder with typical "fear and trembling" their existence, but in the presence of a tutor they are existing in the fullest sense of the word. Their individuality is reassured.

Kierkegaard also makes mention, in his work *Point of View*, of the individual and the crowd. The crowd, according to Kierkegaard, is the untruth and the prevailing attitude of the masses. The crowd is the Roman mob, easily swayed and intimidated by the individual. The individual, on the other hand, is truth. Due to this realization of the simplicity of his or her freedom, the individual exists fully on his or her own, coming to his or her own truths. This freedom draws its power from the ability to choose.

As a tutor, I must realize what the driving force behind tutoring is. For me, it is the making of individuals. Helping people to think and to question their own writing and their prospective abilities as a writer is paramount. Writing, to hear some of the clients tell it, is something they are never going to be good at. "Writing sucks." "Writing is terrible." "I can't write."

This is the attitude of the crowd. It is the crowd that has forced the students to adopt this attitude. And it is the crowd, this influential power, that students must abandon. The crowd does not think, it merely acts. And writing is a process of intense thought. Writing is a process that scares the crowd, due to the intense examination and re-evaluation of self that accompanies it. Through tutoring, we teach students to lose the excess baggage of the crowd and become truly self-confident writers.

Most students struggle with self-doubt. And it is this attitude of self-doubt that pervades through a majority of students' psyches. But, through subtle nudges in the right direction, we tutors allow the students to re-evaluate themselves constantly. By doing this, by engaging them in a dialogue about their writing, we allow them to create a unique self, a self that has gone through the internal discourse and thought development that is accomplished by writing.

There is also Sartre's brand of existentialism, which is often looked on as a philosophy that condemns life in general. However, in all actuality, rather than condemning life, his philosophy condemns the individual to be in control of the burden of his or her own freedom. It resurrects the individual and forces him or her to cast off the essences that enslave. According to Sartre, "Man is condemned to be free...man is free...man is freedom" (295). Each individual, after realizing that one's actions are limited to one's individual will, experiences despair to some degree. This despair, in turn, leads to a corresponding positive abandonment, when the individual realizes that there is no higher power and

that he or she is free to control his or her own life. Sartre puts it best by saying, "In fashioning myself, I fashion man" (292). The existential individual also constantly faces the void: being free to define himself or herself, the individual must constantly face the void or nothingness in order to exist actively.

Sartre gives an example of a man asking for his advice about a major decision. Sartre answers the man's query with a single word, the only word with which he feels he could answer: "Choose." The man is thus burdened, so to speak, with the freedom of choice. Many times in the Writing Center a student will ask as blatantly for your advice. "What should I do in this case?" "What does the teacher really want?" "What will get me an A?" ("Write my paper for me.") As tutors, we can only answer them as Sartre would, by freely offering them the option of choice. We must say "Choose." Choose what you, as a student, think works. Choose what you think will earn you an A. Choose what you think the teacher wants. Like Sartre, all we can really do for students is to have them explore their options. We can guide students to the path to choice.

With this newfound freedom, students may then undergo a period of despair and an overwhelming sense of abandonment. They might enter into an intellectual stasis, not quite yet free to define themselves, not quite fully free to choose, yet still feeling that they have a freedom of choice. Of course, they are abandoned only in the sense that their writing ability now exists within them as their choice. It is our job as tutors not to show them what to choose, but to guide them on the path to individuality, at least as far as their writing is concerned. Their writing must exist on its own, without any sort of cause or blame lying in the hands or at the feet of other parties.

Also part of becoming an individual, according to Sartre, ties into the concept of self-deception. This self-deception is the denial of one's true existence and the subjugation of this existence beneath another existence. Sartre uses the example of a man who has become a bartender and has led himself to believe that his only existence is that of a bartender. In effect, the bartender lies to himself about his existence, his choices.

I often tutor many clients who begin the initial sessions with little confidence in their writing. So I ask them, "What's your paper about? What's your thesis statement? Do you understand the assignment?" And through the weeks, and often months, their papers improve. Their writing begins to take a more well-reasoned and clear shape, reflecting the thinking of a self-confident writer. That is to say that these students lose the crowd's intellectual instability and have started instead down the path to individuality. Moreover, they are no longer in a state of self-deception as far as their writing is concerned.

Finally, the Writing Center has worked for me personally as an existential tool. One of the main premises of existentialism is the ability to act, but act within one's means. Rather than protesting futilely about my responsibilities as a freely choosing individual, and affecting few in the process, I work at the Writing Center, slowly nurturing students towards intellectual confidence and individuality. Acting within my means I defy the void. I exist.

Works Cited

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Joseph S. Hill is a recently graduated Sam Houston State University English major and philosophy minor. He worked at the Writing Center at Sam Houston during his senior year. He is interested in trying to make philosophy work in the modern world, which, in his experience, is a difficult task.

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